Marking Indigeneity : The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations

Eräsaari, Matti

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BOOK REVIEWS

Tēvita O. Ka'ili: *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2017. ISBN-13: 978-0-8165-3056-4 (cloth). 180 p.

Tēvita Ka'ili's *Marking Indigeneity* is an indigenous anthropological study of spatio-temporality among the Tongan community in Hawaii. Theoretically the book draws from indigenous Tongan and more general Oceanic (Moanan) theory, with the author defining the aims of his research within the fields of indigenous studies or indigenous anthropology. The book does not engage with mainstream anthropological theory, but rather seeks to establish an indigenous anthropological study of Oceanic culture that would be based on indigenous theory, interests, and properly maintained social relations.

Ka'ili describes Hawaii Tongans as people who often juggle several jobs alongside their time-consuming traditional obligations, which for their part have multiplied rather than decreased as a consequence of migration. '[F]or Tongans, Maui is a place where work-time beats at an accelerated pace', he writes (p. 12). But rather than describing the community—providing the readers with an in-depth ethnographic account—Ka'ili's focus is on the abstract arrangements that he terms 'sociospatial relations': the way in which the Tongan traditions foreground a particular understanding of space and time.

Ka'ili draws upon the kinds of traditional or ceremonial activities which define and maintain the Tongan community in Hawaii: kava gatherings, prayer vigils, funeral feasts and so on. What these activities have in common is that they all take a lot of time. Kava gatherings are frequent and are expected to last from sunset to sunrise. Funeral wakes and vigils likewise take whole nights; attending burials, fund raisers or graduations also frequently force one to take time off from work.

Ka'ili calls the strategies utilised for these ends 'slowing up time' and 'extending time-space'—modes of temporal agency reminiscent of Moroşanu and Ringel's idea of 'time-tricking': 'the many different ways in which people individually and collectively attempt to modify, manage, bend, distort, speed up, slow down, or structure the times they are living in' (Moroşanu and Ringel 2016: 17). Ka'ili lists examples ranging from the Oceanic demigod Maui slowing down the sun and moon to more contemporary affairs such as calling in sick, continuing a wake at a private home once a funeral home closes, or ignoring the clock while drinking kava. Through this he manages to show how attentive the Tongan language and traditions are to temporal phenomena.

Yet Ka'ili is not talking about any simple act of 'making' or 'finding' more time amidst busy migrant lives. He argues that the objective of such spatiotemporal manipulation is to achieve *symmetry*: symmetry between the requirements of work and community, for instance, or between different social obligations. 'The extension of time-space is manifested', Ka'ili writes, 'in the *faikava* (kava-drinking gatherings) that last from sunset to sunrise, the long eating gatherings, the long conversations (*talanoa*), the all-night funeral wakes, and the early arrival and late departure from meetings and celebrations. These events are extended in

order for Tongans to create enough time and space to participate in symmetrical (mutual) actions.' (P. 111)

'Symmetry', one of Ka'ili's key concepts, thus implies a kind of balance between actors or types of activities. In Ka'ili's usage, symmetry connotes a social aesthetic: 'beautiful' or 'harmonious' relations. If 'balance' (in received ideas like 'balanced reciprocity') evokes the image of measuring scales, Ka'ili exemplifies 'symmetry' with Tongan arts: fine mats, tattoos, bark cloth and the like. It is a pattern, a weave not unlike what Annelise Riles (1998) has described for Fiji. This patterned temporal ideology is made explicit in the Tongan-language concept *tā*, 'time', manifest in the rhythmic patterns formed of repeated beats (*tā*) or repeated images (*tā*) (p. 44). The *tā–vā* or time-space discussed by Ka'ili thus primarily concerns a kind of social rhythm, although this is inseparable from measurable clock time in the final analysis. For Hawaii Tongans, the arrangement of symmetrically patterned activities is also productive of *'taimi faka-Tonga'*, Tongan time; a term employed in reference to a conceived lack of punctuality. Towards the end of the book we encounter Ka'ili himself reflecting on the worth of funeral participation in terms that are more reminiscent of economists like Becker (1965) than the indigenous theories on which Ka'ili relies. Writing about his own inability to contribute money for a funeral, he concludes: 'I could not afford to give $40 (…) I decided that the best way to make up for my small donation was to donate time and labor to the funeral.' (P. 106)

Throughout the book Ka'ili takes care to underline the socio-spatial nature of the social obligations he and the other people discussed in his study are constantly faced with. He uses *va*—the indigenous term translated as space—to signify both 'space' and 'social relations' in a way reminiscent of Doreen Massey's work. Yet Ka'ili's conceptualisation is hard to grasp: *va* appears at once a dimension, a state, a relation, and 'a relational space between two time markers', besides which it can be described as 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant', 'good' or 'bad'.

This is where Ka'ili's book leaves me unsatisfied. Whilst the book prioritises the abstract notion of socio-spatial relations over 'thick' ethnographic data, it does not provide an in-depth theoretical analysis. There is an overview of the Tongan '*tā-vā* theory of reality' originally put forth by 'Ōkusitino Māhina, but the author reiterates Māhina's claims rather than outlining the argument on which they are based. Ka'ili's analysis predominantly combines insights gleaned from Tongan and cognate language idioms with a typological approach to the material: what types of events are funerals, vigils or kava gatherings; what kinds of patterns are created in weaving, printing or tattooing, and so forth. He describes his process as 'writing within Tongan metaphors', work that involves 'splitting everyday reality into strands', 'selecting strands of cultural reality', and 'weaving' them—as one weaves a mat—'to produce a book' (p. 63). This seems like an apt description of the book, but far too often the strips are too narrow: the reader is in no position to verify the at times sweeping claims the author makes. Ka'ili's approach provides new insights, but too often leaves the author just treading water from one chapter to the next. This is evident in the chapter conclusions: Chapter 0ne—'the extension of cultural events creates beautiful sociospatial relations' (p. 22); Chapter Two—'the aim of [the indigenous Tongan art of mediating sociospatial conflicts] is to create and preserve harmonious and beautiful social spaces within all groups and sectors of society' (p. 33); Chapter Three—'the mutual performance of social obligations creates symmetry and gives rise to beautiful social

relations' (p. 47), and so forth. It is hard work to try and conceptualise something previously unconceptualised while using a conceptual framework that also acts as the research data.

The book nonetheless not only provides new viewpoints for temporal analysis—'extending time', temporal symmetry—it also provides fascinating ethnographic glimpses into the apparent downplaying of hierarchy among Hawaii Tongans; the increase of Tongan ceremonial events in Hawaii beyond the level recognised in the home country; the fundraising trips made from Tonga to Hawaii; the church-based social divisions, new reciprocities based on them, and so forth. *Marking Indigeneity* is a book that Oceania scholars can read for new leads and insights, and researchers of spatiotemporal arrangement for an indigenous model of a topic for which anthropology sometimes struggles to discover a language.

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MATTI ERÄSAARI
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
matti.erasaari@helsinki.fi